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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 WELLINGTON 000599

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TAGS: PREL NZ TN

SUBJECT: GNZ VIEWS ON TONGA'S POLITICAL REFORM FOLLOWING
DEATH OF CHAMPION

REF: A. SUVA 215
1B. SUVA 28
1C. SUVA 100
1D. 05 SUVA 613
1E. SUVA 222
1F. WELLINGTON 451
1G. SECSTATE 120947

(U) Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Katherine
1B. Hadda, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) With a vocal domestic population of 40,000 ethnic Tongans, the GNZ has monitored with interest the deaths of Tongan Prince Tu'ipelehake and Princess Kaimana in a July 5 car accident in the United States. GNZ views the death of the Prince as a blow to the political reform process in Tonga. However, NZ officials are unsure whether the reform process will proceed to further democratic reform or will fade with the death of one of its strongest champions. The expatriot Tongan community and GNZ have been closely engaged in the Tongan political reform for several years, as FM Winston Peters discussed with the Secretary during his July visit to Washington. End summary.

Death of Tonga's Champion for Political Reform: GNZ's Views

12. (U) New Zealand officials reacted with strong concern and genuine sadness to the death of Tongan Prince Tu'ipelehake and Princess Kaimana, killed in a car accident south of San Francisco on July 5. As part of an ongoing political reform consultation process, the Prince and Princess were in the United States to meet with ex-patriot Tongans. Their consultation visit followed a similar consultation visit to New Zealand in June.

13. (SBU) New Zealand officials had been quietly working with the Prince to help bring constitutional and political change in the Kingdom of Tonga. According to contacts at the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), when the Tongan government conceded large wage increases at the end of the six-week strike in 2005, it also conceded to a process for examining the possibility of political change through the National Committee on Political Reform (NCPR). Both the Australian and New Zealand Governments provided generous funding for the Committee's work, which began in earnest in February 2006 and, according to MFAT, had gained widespread acceptance in Tonga. The Prince also consulted with the Tongan Community in New Zealand in mid-June, before making similar trips to Australia and the United States.

14. (SBU) MFAT believes the work of the NCPR will be completed, and anticipates its final report in August or September. The head of the Tonga Advisory Council in New Zealand, Melino Maka, who was in Tonga at the time of the Prince's death, told the New Zealand High Commission there that he hoped Tu'ipelehake's death would cause more Tongans to put aside their petty differences and work more co-operatively toward the common goals espoused by the Prince. However, when the Prince was in New Zealand in June, the factious Auckland Tongan community did not act cooperatively to facilitate the Committee's consultations. According to MFAT, the Committee's work is almost complete, but that it will be for others to carry the findings forward to the next phase.

15. (C) But MFAT concedes progress could be slow. Deputy Director of MFAT's Pacific Division, Marion Crawshaw, says, "More has been done in the last two years than in the last 50 years. It may take a few years, but they've got the shoreline stuff sorted out, and while there was concern about the economy 18 months ago, the Minister of Finance has his got his hands firmly around that." She estimates that substantive political reform within 5 years is a probability.

16. (C) Although overseas Tongans are officially outside of its remit, MFAT also hopes the Prince's death will unite the often fractious expatriates. Ma'anaima Soa, Parliamentary staffer to Minister of Pacific Island Affairs Phil Goff and Associate Minister Winnie Laban, separately gave us a more pessimistic readout about the Tongans in New Zealand. She noted that the competing groups had conducted separate memorial services for the Prince and Princess at places

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throughout Auckland and greater New Zealand. Moreover, she expressed sincere doubt that the reform movement would withstand the death of Prince. He was the "heart" of the movement without an heir apparent, she said.

Pacific Issues as New Zealand Domestic Issues

17. (C) As MFAT Deputy Secretary Alan Williams told Emboffs in June (Ref F), in New Zealand "Pacific issues quickly become domestic issues." The Pacific population in New Zealand is 6.2 percent and is growing quickly. Most Islanders are in the Auckland region, including high concentrations in the electorates of Prime Minister Helen Clark and Minister of Pacific Island Affairs Phil Goff. Associate Minister of Pacific Island Affairs (and ethnic Samoan) Winnie Laban's electorate in a Wellington suburb also has one of the highest concentration of Pacific Islanders in New Zealand.

18. (C) When Williams spoke of Pacific issues becoming domestic issues, he had in mind the specific case of political transition in Tonga. At over 40,000, the Tongan diaspora here accounts for about 40 percent of all the world's Tongans, according to GNZ. About 78 percent of them live in Auckland.

19. (U) Until recently, King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV had been residing at his Auckland home, the site of periodic anti-monarchy protests over the last year and of August 2005 property damage and bomb threats coincident with the public service strike in Tonga. On July 1 of this year, a Tongan democracy activist's car burst into flames when he drove into the gates of the residence. (The King was still in the Auckland residence but was unhurt. He soon returned under heightened security to his 88th birthday celebrations to Tonga.)

New Zealand's engagement in Tonga's Political Transition

110. (C) It's therefore understandable that New Zealand takes a special interest in Tonga, and that Wellington's actions

reverberate in Nuku'alofa. When New Zealand's Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Select Committee in 2004 initiated an inquiry into New Zealand's relationship with Tonga, it sparked debate amongst New Zealand's MPs, as well as between loyalist and democratic factions of New Zealand's Tongan diaspora. The final report contained seventeen recommendations, most related to development assistance toward capacity building and good governance initiatives involving the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID).

¶11. (SBU) Among hotly debated issue were freedom of the press and comparisons of Tonga to Zimbabwe, and the trade gap between New Zealand and Tonga. The then Acting Prime Minister of Tonga, Clive Edwards, condemned the inquiry as "patronizing and a breach of sovereignty," and asked, rhetorically, where else the GNZ had made inquiries in the Pacific. The Commonwealth's special envoy to Tonga, Sir Douglas Graham said, "An aggressive inquiry may make Tonga's rulers less willing to embrace democratic reforms." The Tongan Government declined the approaches of New Zealand's Foreign Affairs Select Committee to discuss the inquiry. (The Committee's full report can be found at www.clerk.parliament.govt.nz.)

Comment

¶12. (C) FM Peters visited Tonga in March, and when he met with the Secretary on July 19 he highlighted GNZ's effort to introduce democracy to Tonga (Ref G). (Ironically, before Peters was named as Foreign Minister his party, NZ First, criticized the 2005 Parliamentary report on Tonga as "interference by New Zealand into the affairs of another country.") While GNZ's primary Pacific concern remains with Melanesia, particularly its ongoing commitments through the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), it recognizes that it is facing the winds of change with long-standing Polynesian partners.

¶13. (C) While MFAT is optimistic that real democratic reforms will be achieved in Tonga in the longer term, it remains unclear as to how the movement will respond to the death of its champion, Prince Tu'ipelehake, in the near term. GNZ officials will remain actively engaged in the process due to their deep commitment to Pacific issues and because of the active and sizable Tongan diaspora in New Zealand. GNZ

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efforts to encourage reform in Tonga will be largely kept from public view, and will most likely rely on sustained capacity building and good governance initiatives promoted through NZAID. End Comment.

McCormick